

Introduction

In recent decades, the inexorable advance of economic globalization has been accompanied by accelerating human mobility across international borders. While some migrants plan on temporary stays, many others arrive with the idea of making a home in a different country, whether in search of new job opportunities or as an escape from violence. Within this complex new framework, international migration is a central concern both because of its magnitude and because of the challenges of managing it. While national states try to contain such population flows through ever-more-restrictive immigration policies, they confront the simultaneous challenge of integrating the new immigrants, who may come from countries with different languages and cultures. The new relations the state establishes with those who are migrating both within and outside its territories have gradually acquired such centrality that it is impossible to understand contemporary societies without observing the specific forms in which they relate to those who move from, toward, or across their borders.

In effect, unlike the states of the modern era—which assumed an identity across state, territory, and nation—contemporary states must reinvent themselves to, in one way or another, incorporate both immigrants and their own citizens who leave the national territory to live in other countries. Thus, international migration poses new demands for research and policy: To develop a new understanding of the state, citizenship, and the sense of national belonging in contexts of intense population

mobility. To redefine the relationship between identity and territory when broad sectors of the population move across borders. To define the rights to be granted to people born in another country. To think about the “national” character from the point of view of global cities that are home to ever-multiplying languages, religions, and cultural traditions. In sum, to rethink social integration in the face of intense migration.

The integration of immigrants has taken many different forms over time. Today, the nation-states that are receivers of immigrants try to achieve their integration into the destination society, which implies planning and implementing initiatives that respond to the challenge of managing growing cultural diversity. Such responses have met with various degrees of success. While countries like Canada and Australia have adopted integration policies evidently oriented toward multicultural recognition, others, such as Germany, debate whether multiculturalism still works. In the United States, the leading destination of international migration, while some measures have been adopted to make room for growing pluralism in the population, in practice the task of integration is left to the market and to immigrants themselves. In still other cases, such as France, the Netherlands, and Spain, new integration policies have involved the establishment of formal contracts for immigrants in their processes of integration.

In this sense, the “problem of integration” has always existed. We might think, for instance, of debates about the status of colonized populations or the issue of excluding indigenous populations. This topic now takes on new characteristics because beyond signifying the redefinition of the rights and obligations of immigrants, it implies the need to rethink the relationships each society must establish with itself in the contemporary manner of inhabiting space.

This is surely why debates about the place of immigrants in contemporary societies have taken off in new directions. Until the end of the twentieth century, such discussion seemed to revolve around an opposition between assimilation and multiculturalism. In this sense, in its classic formulation, the assimilation of immigrants was seen as a natural process by which people from different ethnic groups eventually became indistinguishable from the native population through the adoption of the cultural patterns and participation in the social institutions of the country of destination, especially through marriage outside the ethnic group, until they had adopted a common identity with the members of the receiving society.¹

Later, this approach gave way to others that sought to recognize the increasing complexity of that process. Such is the case with the theory of segmented assimilation, which questions the apparent connection between assimilation and upward social mobility, emphasizing the diversity of immigrant assimilation experiences. While some members of immigrant groups remain excluded from economic mobility, others find multiple paths to assimilation depending on their national origins, immigration and socioeconomic status, context of arrival in the destination society, and family social and financial resources.² Thus, this revision of the assimilation paradigm holds that there is no direct relation between assimilation and upward social mobility. The children of immigrants who live in poverty do not owe their situation to a lack of assimilation, but to full assimilation into a lower—and degraded—segment of the receiving society.

On the other hand, in the multiculturalist perspective, cultural difference is recognized as a constitutive element of all societies. Therefore the goal of receiving societies should not be the pursuit of gradual dissolution of cultural divisions, but rather the harmonious management of difference. The multiculturalist perspective has been nourished by such fundamental experiences as the civil rights movements of the United States, which unlike earlier sociopolitical mobilizations, have specific features: they are linked to specific ethnic groups, denounce the discrimination of which these have been objects, and demand respect for equality of opportunity while at the same time defending cultural specificity. This represents a major shift both on the analytical level and in terms of political philosophy, because this perspective upholds the need to simultaneously guarantee the right to difference and the right to equity. Such a position implies, among other things, a transformation of the relation between the individual and the state, which becomes obligated to guarantee respect for diversity in the public realm through a policy of recognition of cultural difference.

Thus, assimilationism and multiculturalism are not merely two perspectives from which to analyze diversity and social integration, but additionally they guide the design and application of public policy in particular historical and geographic contexts. Nonetheless, as the twenty-first century dawned, two of the premises that underlie both assimilationism and multiculturalism were increasingly questioned, giving rise to new approaches to the study of the incorporation of immigrants. Those premises are that social integration in the receiving societies necessarily

involves a distancing from the places of origin, and that the “problem of integration” fundamentally involves the societies receiving the immigrants, while the communities of origin are relatively unimportant, progressively letting go of their connections to the emigrants.

In opposition to these premises, transnationalism proposes that the integration of immigrants into receiving societies does not necessarily involve the rupture of ties to communities of origin. Numerous ethnographic studies have demonstrated the vitality that can be maintained through transnational migration networks, allowing immigrants to live simultaneously in their countries of origin and destination.³

The migration of Mexicans to the United States stands out by virtue of its volume and its historic trajectory. This experience has given rise to the research project whose results are presented in this book. Mexicans are the most numerous group of immigrants in the United States, accounting for nearly a third of the total. In 2006, there were 11.6 million Mexican immigrants residing in that country, of whom seven million (60 percent) were undocumented.⁴ A variety of actors within US society and politics have stressed the positive value of the presence and integration of this vast population. However, other voices have expressed concern and skepticism, including some within the US academic sector. For example, Samuel Huntington declared that the most immediate and serious challenge to the traditional identity of the United States stemmed from Latin American immigration, especially the immigration from Mexico. For him, many Mexican immigrants and their descendants simply did not seem to identify primarily with the United States, and he warned that “the Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream US culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.”⁵

In contrast to Huntington’s and similar perceptions, this book seeks to broaden the knowledge of the efforts, successes, and challenges involved in the integration of Mexican immigrants in the United States. The first distinguishing characteristic of this work is that it takes as a point of departure the need to analyze the process of incorporation (or non-incorporation) without underestimating the importance of immigrants’ ties to their sending communities as a part of this process. The fact that our research team is located in the border region of Mexico contributes to our emphasis on this perspective, distinguishing this study from others carried out within the classic approach to integration that has occupied a central place in US social science.

This perspective has also clearly affected the selection of metropolitan Los Angeles as our research site. In spite of a recent broadening in the destinations of Mexican immigrants within the United States, the Los Angeles region, made up of five counties in Southern California, has continued to be their most important destination. In that sense, Los Angeles is paradigmatic. As the second largest metropolitan area in the United States, it is the largest destination of international immigrants after New York, and Mexicans constitute the largest group of immigrants in this California metropolis.

In 2007, the estimate for Mexican immigrants living in the Los Angeles metropolitan area stood at slightly more than 2.6 million. Thus this area constitutes the fourth most important concentration of Mexicans, after the metropolitan areas of Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. Similarly, with the Mexican immigrant population accounting for 14 percent of the total population of metropolitan Los Angeles, it far outnumbers the other immigrant groups.⁶

This book analyzes the integration of Mexican immigrants in metropolitan Los Angeles with three principal goals: (1) To analyze these immigrants' economic and social integration from a quantitative perspective, using data from the 2007 American Community Survey. (2) To examine the immigrants' economic, social, cultural, and political integration from an ethnographic perspective. Toward this end we analyze the integration experience of three groups of immigrants—from the Mexican states of Zacatecas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz—which settled in the Los Angeles region at different times in different historical contexts. (3) To document the public policies that recent administrations of the city and county of Los Angeles have implemented to facilitate or restrict Mexican immigrants' integration.

This book presents an analysis that differs from other studies of immigrant integration in that it approaches that process from a multidisciplinary perspective, examining four distinct dimensions: economic, social, political, and cultural. In addition, by looking at the revision of public policies implemented at several levels of Los Angeles government, we seek to illustrate local governments' capacity for action within the processes of integration. Although it is true that immigration policy as such in the United States is defined by the federal government, the states, counties, and cities administer federal policies of integration through their regulation of the daily interaction of natives and immigrants at work, in school, and in public spaces in general. In this sense, the strategies of integration carried out by immigrants respond specifically to the

particular contexts in which they live. The interaction between public policies and the strategies employed by the immigrants themselves is the framework within which immigrants' integration into the city takes place.

Our research employed an array of sources. On the one hand, we used a fundamental database, the American Community Survey of 2007, to analyze the social and economic integration of Mexican immigrants in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. On the other hand, assuming that the processes of integration need to be analyzed from a broad temporal perspective, we examined the experiences of immigrants from Zacatecas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. For each of these population groups we selected three different communities of origin with significant representation in Los Angeles. That selection enabled us to carry out ninety interviews with immigrants from the nine localities, as well as dozens of further interviews with informants who, though not from the nine selected communities, also provided important elements for the analysis. The group is not a random or probability sample, but rather one constructed according to "snowball" methodology while taking care to achieve diversity in such characteristics as age, sex, marital status, occupation, and immigration status. Although at first the support of leaders of immigrants' associations was a fundamental resource for contacting our interview subjects, we also took care to include the experiences of those who were not part of any association. Finally, in terms of the average dates of our interviewees' taking up residence in Los Angeles, our sample (as will be seen in chapter 2) reflects the longevity of the Zacatecan immigrant population and the recentness of the Verucruzan one, with the Oaxacan community in between.

The interviews reflect our interviewees' experiences in relation to their economic, social, cultural, and political integration. Most were carried in the informants' homes, and others in their workplaces or in public space. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted an average of one hour. Finally, after reviewing a wide spectrum of reports and other materials, both journalistic ones and those carried out by a variety of organizations and government bodies, we documented various aspects of legislation that directly or indirectly have impacted the processes of economic, social, cultural, and political incorporation of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles.

The book's structure reflects the analytical strategy outlined above. In the first part, in chapter 1 we discuss the theoretical perspectives underlying our analysis of the process of immigrant integration, and in

chapter 2 we present the construction of the Mexican immigrant community in Los Angeles, stressing the particularities of this process in the Zacatecan, Oaxacan, and Veracruzian communities. Chapter 3 presents the results of the descriptive statistical analysis of integration based on the American Community Survey.

The second part of the book presents an ethnographic analysis of the process of integration. In chapter 4 we describe the economic integration of Zacatecans, Oaxacans, and Veracruzians. The trajectories they followed from the first jobs obtained in Los Angeles to their employment at the time of the interviews allow us to identify sharp differences in the achievements and strategies of the immigrants from these three different Mexican states. Chapters 5 and 6, devoted respectively to social and cultural integration, consider the importance of the strategies that the immigrants themselves developed in order to incorporate into the receiving society, which include recourse to transnational ties and to intermediary bodies (such as immigrants' associations, cultural or religious groups, and school parents' associations). Finally, chapter 7, on political integration, examines the implications of immigration law in the processes of integration, as well as the perceptions and actions of the immigrants themselves in the face of this legal environment.

The third part of the book (chapter 8) centers on public policies that impact the processes of integration. In it we examine the various laws and regulations in effect in the Los Angeles region that have a direct impact on these processes. This section allows us to stress the importance of the analysis of integration at two governmental levels: the city and the county of Los Angeles.

Finally, the conclusion discusses the main contemporary characteristics of the processes of integration of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, which must be understood both in relation to the contexts of the immigrants' arrival and in relation to the nature and density of their ties with Mexico. Relatively recent events such as the global financial crisis unleashed in 2008 and the increase in violence and insecurity in Mexico have impacted the integration trajectories of the Zacatecans, Oaxacans, and Veracruzians we interviewed. The results of the research presented here suggest that the transformation of immigrants' integration strategies will have an important impact not only in the United States but also in Mexico.